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Religious Leaders Can Motivate Men To Cede Power And Reduce Intimate Partner

Violence: Experimental Evidence From Uganda

Violence committed by men against women in intimate relationships is a pervasive problem around the world. Patriarchal norms that place men as the head of household are often to blame. Previous research suggests that trusted authorities can shift perceptions of norms and create behavior change. In many settings, a compelling authority on behavior in relationships is religious leaders, who are influential sources of information about proper conduct in relationships and gatekeepers of marriage, but may also uphold traditional gender roles. One way leaders exert their influence is through premarital or couples counseling courses. In this study, we test whether, if given an opportunity to offer a more progressive religious interpretation of gender roles during these courses, religious leaders could motivate men to share power and thereby reduce violence. Building on existing faith networks of Christian religious leaders in western Uganda, we conducted a large pair-matched, randomized controlled trial among 1,680 heterosexual couples in which participants were randomized to attend a 12-session group counseling course or wait-listed. We find that the program shifted power from men to women and reduced intimate partner violence by five percentage points, comparable with more intensive secular programs. These improvements were largest among couples counseled by religious leaders who held the most progressive views at baseline and who critically engaged with the material. Our findings suggest that religious leaders can be effective agents of change for reducing violence.

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